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ABSTRACT

A study at a state university examined a portfolio method of evaluation in two freshmen composition classes; in both, the portfolio was used as a pass-fail method of ensuring department-wide standards. A professor attended two different composition classes and did the work for each; in addition, eight students were interviewed from those classes three different times during the semester. Results indicated that freshmen were initially very confused about the purpose of the portfolio method. When their teacher told them that the portfolios were more an evaluation of her teaching than their writing, they took her at her word. Students then constructed a meaning for portfolios that deflected their attention from their writing, and stood in opposition to the stated goal of the portfolio program. Students were also very frustrated with the lack of actual commentary on the final portfolio evaluations. While midterm evaluations provided space for the commentator's observations, the final evaluation form did not; much to their chagrin, most students received only a single comment, such as "Congratulations." Despite such formalistic difficulties, however, many of the students found the portfolio method worthwhile finally. It developed skills of self-criticism, attention to audience, a respect for persuasive writing, and a willingness to revise writing to make it consistently strong. (TB)

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ED 370 132

Views from the Cellar:
Students' Versions of Portfolio Assessment
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Alexis Nelson

Portfolio assessment generally has elicited a great deal of interest from our profession; the particular mutation that I discuss is the writing portfolio as a substitute for the Composition 101 proficiency exam. Impressive claims are made on behalf of such portfolio assessment, which I won't rehearse here. Suffice it to say these claims are made by the people using the assessment device, not by those undergoing it. As composition teachers, scholars, and program administrators, we seldom have the opportunity to listen systematically to the voices of students who undergo portfolio assessment, so questions remain. How do they understand a writing portfolio in relation to their composition course? What sense do **students** make of a device that bears little resemblance to their other experiences of writing assessment? In order to hear the students' stories that would help me to answer such questions, in the Fall of 1992 I undertook a study at a state university which uses portfolio assessment in English 101--that is to say, I attended the composition class of two different teachers; did the required work; interviewed at length eight students from those classes three times during the semester; transcribed, sorted, and analyzed the interview data. I listened with a critical ear to students' interpretations of writing portfolios. What I describe is *not* idle hearsay, or faculty gossip, or student union bravado. Rather, this account is informed by the methods and criteria of ethnography, and it presents a few aspects of a larger portrait of us and our machinations as students see them upon reflection over time. These stories are grouped chronologically and thematically: first I summarize what students said about

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portfolios before experiencing them; next, I use the students' own words describing their midterm and final portfolio experiences, and I conclude by examining the impact of composition on one student.

My first interviews took place after students had received the official department description of portfolios in their composition classes but before they had direct experience of creating their own portfolios. Students understood portfolios to be about the university's practice of sorting, gate-keeping, confusing, or threatening its newest members. That said, I want to introduce a couple students using their own words because they return later in this account. For Madeline, who started the year with great enthusiasm for her writing course, portfolios were utterly baffling--and remained so for most of the semester. She first said of them , "I don't get it. I don't understand. Just because you do all the work, you may not pass English if the people think your work is not adequate? And I'm like 'Geez, that's pretty deep.'" More strident was Jeremy, who growled:

> They don't affect the final grade . . . [but] they can either . . . say pass or fail, and there goes the course for you. Which is a lot of wasted time for the freshman . . . who thinks he might be doing good . . . . There's just that chance of somebody doing well in class and then failing. I don't think our chance is that big. I just think it's **outrageous** that it could actually happen.

Thus the initial responses to the idea of portfolios.

After the midterm or dry-run portfolios, all the students understood that the assessment device had almost nothing to do with their final grades in English. Since a grade is the familiar assessment device and one's portfolio does not affect the grade provided it

passes, then portfolios had to be about something other than the assessment of the students' own writing. Students worked hard to construct a meaning for such a quirky evaluation practice, and the meaning that more than half of them constructed was this: *portfolio assessment has to do with teacher formation or teacher supervision*. Computer engineering student John, who describes himself as "kicked-back," said this: "Somebody's looking over the [TAs'] shoulders." The lively art and business major Isabella said, "Maybe they'd look at it as how she's been teaching us. It's all well and good to get input and say 'Oh you passed,' but I think it's more they're [the English Department] trying to get a reflection of what she's been doing for us." Another engineering student Charles concurred: "My guess is that it's to keep the TA's so they know what they're doing and also to let us know how well we write. The suspicious Jeremy went even further, saying, "I'm sure that undermines a teacher's confidence a little bit . . . Teachers like feeling students believe in them. So . . . I don't think that helps the teaching process a lot especially 'cause she's a TA, and . . . basically like a little child here."

Nearly all the students who identified teacher formation as the reason behind portfolio assessment had the same teacher, Emily. In order to allay her students' fears about their portfolios and perhaps to emphasize that her own standards were quite high, Emily told her class that portfolios were more an assessment of her teaching than their writing, and *they took her at her word*. Students then constructed a meaning for portfolios that deflected their attention from their writing, and stood in opposition to the stated goal of the portfolio program. Or put another way, making writers of these students was of *less* institutional value than *overseeing* the teachers for whom they wrote. Probably writing program

administrators do not regard TA supervision as the reason for portfolio assessment, but students well may. Whereas composition directors will advert to community standards and minimum competencies, few students do, and in this instance, neither did the teacher. This fact remains: because some teachers are compelled, not voluntary, participants in portfolio assessment, they may describe portfolios in such a way as to direct students' attention away from their own writing. For writing program administrators, then, several questions are raised. How does an institution go about socializing its new teacher-members? Might that socializing process be configured so that *teachers* see portfolios as aids in the difficult task of evaluation rather than undercutting their authority? Might teachers construe portfolios in their classrooms so that *students* are encouraged to see them as helpful, as an occasion for feedback that's free, as a venue for developing a voice that is audible within the academy? Teacher resistance suggests at the very least that important conversations about academic folkways are not taking place, or are being misread, or are not shared.

After the final portfolios were evaluated, I heard a quite different stories, stories which reveal students' reactions when they received less feedback on the final portfolio than they had on their midterm portfolios. I want to emphasize that whereas the midterm verdict sheet provided space for the reader to comment on the essay as well as to evaluate it, the final portfolio verdict sheet afforded space *only* for evaluation--and that space was used mainly on students whose portfolios failed. If one passed, she was told, "Congratulations," and that's about all. That change in form is critical. Several students used what they learned on their dry-run portfolios to revise their work. Isabella, for example, radically overhauled an essay because of her portfolio reader's assessment. To revise her essay, a

review of David Lynch's film Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, Isabella watched the film again twice on video. She said:

> I've seen this movie three times now, and each time I've understood it a little bit more. And I realize how confusing the movie actually is, so when I revise it again. . . . I'll just incorporate that as a flaw in the film, saying [Lynch] is not reaching everyone he could. It's a confusing film, but it's also confusing, I think, to read any of the reviews if you haven't ever seen the [TV] show.

The response of an additional reader, then, caused Isabella to engage in several writerly activities. She saw the film again, reconsidering its impact on its audience and acknowledging that what was a given for her--Lynch's originality as a director--could confuse naive viewers. She identified herself with a community of writers, that is, film critics who had treated both the television and film versions of Twin Peaks. She refined her thesis into a more narrowly focused piece of advice for her audience. Contrast these consequences of assessment to her reaction to the final portfolio reading: "I don't think I got any [feedback]. You know, just checks. There aren't any comments or anything. It didn't mean anything, so I felt like it was pointless to even try . . . . Getting them back, you get so irritated 'cause there's nothing." Like every informant who completed the final portfolio, she bristled at the lack of response. Finding a number of typos and spelling mistakes in her final portfolio--which the reader had not noted, Isabella grew skeptical of her reader's thoroughness. More important, the second reading shifted her attention away from writerly concerns to typing concerns.

All passing students complained despite their having passed! Having received

formative feedback from their midterm assessors, they were disappointed to receive no such feedback from their final assessors. Students had typified the process in one way--as offering them information from a reader who responded to them as writers. When the final portfolios lacked the reader's response, that is, when students were merely evaluated rather than engaged as writers, their previous understanding was destroyed and the enterprise of portfolio assessment laid open to question. Their distress reminds us that predictability is the bedrock of sense-making in the academy as well as elsewhere. Because predictability is so important to students' constructing their academic lives, because students learned from their readers' midterm responses, and because students disdained the absence of response to their final portfolios, institutional effort might well be directed toward increasing consistency of students' expectations between the two portfolio readings.

We would consider these students' construction of portfolios as teacher-assessment unfortunate, and equally unfortunate is the way the final portfolio reading ruptured their belief that the assessment process had something to do with treating them as writers to whom readers respond. But proponents of portfolios can delight in the way portfolios sharpen less sophisticated writers' ideas about audience and revision. It is a commonplace that many students write for themselves or for their teachers and consequently have trouble seeing revision as anything more than cleaning up the mechanics. Recall Madeline--"Geez--that's deep." She was stuck for a good part of the semester trying to determine her audience--and acting as though it were herself. In our middle interview, she said of her teacher, "I want her to read it how I read it, but she won't, ever. . . . She's sooo nit-picky." Madeline had trouble revising, in part because she considered only her teacher's marginal notes. "Like in

the revision, I have not made any more changes than what she says, and I don't know if I should or what . . . . Does she want me to change more than she's marked? I guess she does. But what if it's not right? Then I'll be in even deeper hot water." Like several informants, she went through much of the semester with a very mechanical notion of revision; however, it was clear when she talked about her final portfolio that she had made a breakthrough to another view of education and another understanding of writing. Madeline too was disappointed with such a puny response to her final portfolio: "I wish they would have said something. I mean, OK, it passed, but something that I could possibly work off of, like learn from. Not if they don't want to correct spelling, they don't have to. But if they just want to say 'This is a little confusing here.' They're not suggestions, but then I could have thought about it." How important this change is. First, Madeline recognizes that concern about spelling is of *less* value than learning where her prose confuses a reader; second, she understands herself to benefit rather than to smart from suggestions on how she might revise. By the end of the course, she has "caught on" to the explicitly rhetorical dimension of writing: "[The portfolio] was a hassle, but it's really just to prove you can write [when] you're a future employee . . . when you graduate. And it's kind of a hassle, but it also kind of makes sense too. I mean, you have proof that you can do it. And that people from a college think you can too." So the writing portfolio gave Madeline a collection of her work upon which the university had passed a favorable judgment.

Recall Jeremy, who thought portfolios were "outrageous." Portfolios pulled him kicking and screaming into audience awareness. The sting of his middling dry-run performance pushed Jeremy to examine his assumptions about writing. He recalled that

essay:

> I guess I didn't really have a lot of emphasis on why Road Warrior was such an original movie. It was kind of more hitting at than really stabbing it. . . . Sometimes I get so caught up and think it's so great in my mind that sometimes it just loses that on the paper. . . . Sometimes you can look at [a piece of writing] and [say] "This is my writing. Anything wrong with it?" And then after a while you do have to be critical of yourself. And then you see: "What the hell was I doing? Where was I going?" . . . It clearly expresses my opinions to me, but it's not clear **to everybody else.** And that's my main problem because it's more than writing for me.

Not only has Jeremy revised an essay, he has examined his understanding of his written productions. When he assembled his final portfolio, Jeremy redoubled his efforts. He included in it an essay he had written arguing against the English Department's policy of doing portfolio assessment. "[I selected that paper] so they would think. It's [the] most well-written paper, most opinionated paper, and I think I hit the point and I hit the point hard. I had reasons for every point I made. But I'm worried about getting another paper like as strong as this. I don't want to give just a strong [essay] and one that's kind of mediocre." What writing teacher or program administrator would not celebrate these writerly developments in Jeremy: self-criticism, the desire to affect one's audience--even to change its mind, the willingness to revise in order to make writing consistently strong?

My last story provides a look at one consequence of the composition course, a single outcome experienced by a single student. Madeline, the almost terminally bewildered freshman, described her discomfort with the kind of writing the academy values--persuasion.

Half-way through the semester she said, "Normally I wouldn't like, I don't, I'm not the type of person to put my foot down and take a stand on something and go wave my pickets. . . . And when I have to write to make an opinion on this [essay] coming up--I think that just comes out in me. Like, I do have opinions. I'm just not the type to like speak out about 'em." Madeline has ideas and judgments but no ease expressing them or attaching them to herself. Taking a public stand is **not** characteristic of the self she has worked at establishing. During our final interview at the end of the semester, she had changed.

> This is something I've thought about in this course. When it's about discrimination against women, or the other one, it's about the rain forest--(these are her two "opinion-research" essays)--like I did take, make, get an opinion. I feel like--and this may sound quanta weird--but I feel like I'm quanta developing like I want. I mean, I'm getting opinions, but it's more like just becoming more **wordly**, worldly.

If that is a slip of the tongue to Madeline, it ought not be to us who might hear a Joycean whisper about language. If **voice** is that part of the self that has ideas and judgments, then Madeline always had a voice; all semester she had opinions (though she routinely finished them off by saying them "I don't know.") If, however, having a voice means having a context that required her to create a public self engaged in important discourse--then her writing class evoked that voice. Because of her Composition 101 research and persuasion assignments, Madeline's understanding of deforestation, racism, and gender-based economic discrimination grew; with increased understanding, she responded, she expressed her **self**--writing about public issues in a public forum. She began to value what the academy values--argument and persuasion--and *to value in herself her own capacity to manage argument*, to

"take, make, get an opinion."

To conclude: insofar as portfolios reveal our values to students and thus make the tacit curriculum more explicit; insofar as portfolios promote our students' enfranchisement in our academic worlds; insofar as portfolios afford students insight into the worlds of their readers which impinge upon them as writers, they afford a benefit to those who must produce them as well as to the curricula we create. Insofar as they miss those marks, we might wonder about the paper and the energy they consume.

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